

## Safety Opened Her Arms And Welcomed You Home by lilies\_in\_a\_vase

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** Billy Hargrove & Maxine "Max" Mayfield Have a Good Relationship, Billy Hargrove Needs a Hug, Billy Hargrove is a Mess, Dreams and Nightmares, Eleven | Jane Hopper & Jim "Chief" Hopper Parent-Child Relationship, Family Bonding, Family Feels, Fever, Fever Dreams, Gen, Good Parent Jim "Chief" Hopper, Happy Ending, Hopeful Ending, Hurt Billy Hargrove, Hurt/Comfort, Minor Joyce Byers/Jim "Chief" Hopper, Neil Hargrove's A+ Parenting, Nightmares, POV Billy Hargrove, POV Jim "Chief" Hopper, Parent Jim "Chief" Hopper, Parental Jim "Chief" Hopper, Past Child Abuse, Post-Season/Series 02, Pre-Season/Series 03, Protective Parent Jim "Chief" Hopper, Sick Billy Hargrove, Sick Character, Sickfic, Stomach Ache, Vomiting, no beta we die like men, stomach flu

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**Summary:**

Billy's been staying with Hop and El for a couple weeks when Hopper gets the call that he's passed out at school.

(First chapter is the fic from Hop's perspective, second chapter is the same fic but from Billy's perspective).



# 1. POV Hopper

## Author's Note:

I started writing this from Hopper's perspective, but then I got a little curious about what it would be like from Billy's, so you're getting both! So you get to choose which one seems most fun to read!

Disclaimer:

I don't own "Stranger Things".

Jim has never dealt with sick teenagers before. He has dealt with sick little girls, too much, more than enough for a whole lifetime, and thankfully El hasn't been sick yet. But he has never dealt with a sick teenager.

And yet, he's pretty certain Billy is coming down with something. Or maybe he's just being a moody teen. That's possible, too. The kid's been staying with him and El for a month, and El told him he'd had a headache when he came home.

They're eating dinner now, although Billy isn't doing much eating. He's pushing his food around on its plate, potatoes and sausages and tomatoes, and Jim's been watching him do it for five minutes now, looking at him from across the table.

"Something wrong with the food?" he asks, and immediately regrets his phrasing when Billy glances up at him, wary.

"No," he says, and stabs a piece of potato, harder than necessary,

making the fork clink as it hits the porcelain.

When Billy first moved in, he'd seemed a little shocked and more than a little panicked when Jim hadn't put the food on a plate for El and a plate for him. Jim had been confused at first, had thought that they were both old enough to put food on their own plates without making a mess everywhere, but then he'd talked to Joyce. Had told her about how Billy only took a little bit of food, how he waited until both he and El had a second serving and Jim asked him if he wanted more before he reached out and took some. Joyce had looked at him sadly and told him Billy's parents probably decided how much he should eat, and if he didn't finish he'd probably have been punished.

Jim isn't ashamed to say he'd ripped the receipt in his hand and wished it was Neil Hargrove's neck.

"Something happen at school?" Jim asks, and El looks up at him with furrowed, raised eyebrows. This isn't really like him, and he knows it. This cautious questioning. He has a tendency to shout, and she has a tendency to shout back just as much, but he can't do that with Billy. Not after the full body flinch the kid did the first - and last - time Jim raised his voice.

"School's fine," Billy mutters. He takes a tiny piece of sausage to his mouth, chews it for over a minute before Jim sees him swallow.

"You feeling alright?"

Billy sighs, let's go of his fork. It clatters to the plate, then down to the table. "What do you want?" he asks, staring at him. Jim feels a

bit like he's challenging him for a fight.

Jim's not going to rise up to it. He looks down at his own plate, cutting his sausage in half. "What do you mean?"

"What's with the questions? What is this? Am I being interrogated, *Chief?*"

He can feel both Billy's and El's eyes on him. "No," he says, taking the time to continue, chewing and swallowing. "We've been eating for about, twenty minutes, half an hour, maybe. And I've just asked you three questions during the span of that time. *Normal* questions."

Billy doesn't say anything, just stays there watching him for a couple seconds more. Then he sets his lips into a thin line and takes the fork again, starting to eat while avoiding Jim's gaze.

Jim watches him for about five more minutes, how he's struggling to swallow, and sighs.

"You don't have to finish eating if you're not hungry, Billy."

Billy doesn't say anything, he just pushes his chair back and stands up, grabbing his plate without looking up at them and leaving it on the kitchen counter. He, well, he more or less marches up the stairs Jim had installed when it became clear Billy was moving in, up to the loft, and Jim gets the feeling that had the kid been braver he'd have given him the finger on the way.

“Bitchin?” El asks, looking after him.

Jim never really thought he’d be teaching her bad words, but what the hell. He reaches out and ruffles her hair, smiling when she grimaces. “Nah, kid. He’s just bitchy.”

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At least Billy’s mood seems to have improved somewhat the next morning. Not that Jim sees much of him, since he has an early shift at the station. But Billy answers his ‘Good morning’ when he comes down the stairs towards the bathroom with his towel and clothes in a bundle under his arm, right as Jim has knocked on El’s door and made sure she’s awake.

He takes out bread and cheese and orange juice and leaves it on the kitchen counter before leaving.

It doesn’t even get to lunch before Flo is knocking on his door and sticking her head in, looking uncharacteristically worried.

“Call from the high school for you, Hop. It’s the principal.”

Jim had expected that he would eventually get a call about Billy. He's a volatile teenager with too much angst that he hasn't learned what to do with other than use his fists, which, come to think of it, isn't too dissimilar from El and himself. Jim's just trying to figure out if he's supposed to answer this call as Billy's legal guardian or as the Chief of Police when he reaches for the phone.

"Chief Hopper?" comes the principal's voice on the other end. Jim still hasn't learned his name. He probably should, especially since he's going to have two kids going to the man's school after the summer.

"Speaking."

"It's about William." *Who else?* "I think you should probably get here. Pick him up and take him home."

"What did he do?" Jim asks, sighing. This doesn't sound good, and Jim is worried Billy's being suspended.

"He passed out. Jonathan Byers found him and took him to the nurse. He's sick."

Jim feels his stomach drop. Shit. *Shit shit shit.* "I'm on my way."

He puts the phone back down on its receiver, reaches for his jacket and hat and puts them on, closing the door to his office so hard it makes it rattle.

“Chief!” Callahan calls. “Where you going?”

“My kid’s sick!” He shouts back, storming out of the precinct with Flo sending him an encouraging smile.

The high school hasn’t changed much since Jim went there, so he doesn’t need to ask anyone for directions to the school nurse.

The students all thankfully seem to be in class, so there’s no one to see him sprinting to the nurse’s office, and hopefully won’t be anyone there to see him taking Billy away. It feels like Billy’s the type of kid that wouldn’t appreciate the embarrassment.

The nurse is waiting for him outside her closed door, and she gives him a soft smile when she sees him.

“How is he?”

“He was only out for a couple of seconds, and Jonathan said he caught himself, so no risk for concussion. I think it’s the stomach flu; it’s been going around. He should be fine with rest and plenty of fluids,” she says, her voice kind. Jim remembers the nurse when he was young, and she was more of an old hag than anything else. He’s glad his kids have a better one.

She turns around and opens the door, letting him get in past her.

There's a tiny little waiting area first, then there's her office and exam room, the door closed. Billy's waiting, curled in on himself with a blanket across his shoulders, in one of the plush armchairs there.

Jim doesn't hesitate before he's moving forward. "Billy?"

"Hi, Hop," Billy says without looking up. He sounds tired, shy, almost. He doesn't move for a second or so, but then he's pushing himself up with a hand on the armrest, swaying, the blanket falling off. Jim reaches out a hand to steady him.

"I can walk," Billy mutters.

"Last I heard, you collapsed when you tried that by yourself. Just humour me, kid."

Billy must be too tired, too sick, to protest, because he lets Jim keep a hand on his arm the whole way to the cruiser. Which is honestly a little worrying.

Jim opens the passenger side door for him, and closes it once Billy's inside. He rounds the car and gets in, glancing over at Billy while he puts his seatbelt on. The kid's turned away from him, one arm in his lap, curled against his stomach, his head leaning against the cool glass of the window.

Jim pulls out of the school parking lot, and the ride is uneventful up until the point where he turns onto the road leading into the forest to

his cabin.

“Stop,” Billy croaks, and Jim turns his head to see his hand on the door handle. He presses down on the breaks hard, so hard the seatbelt strains against his chest, but less than a second later Billy’s throwing the car door open and falling to the ground outside.

Jim hears him start retching and pulls his seatbelt off, getting out of the car and rounding it to crouch down beside Billy.

The kid’s shaking, coughing up mouthfuls of vomit, and Jim’s worried. In the back of his mind, he thinks it’s lucky Billy’s got the loft, and that El’s got a door, because it hopefully means that she won’t get sick, too. Sara threw up, at times, after her treatments. It’s bringing up shitty memories.

But then Billy gasps, trying to curl up even more, and still shaking, his chest heaving. It’s early spring, the sun shining through the trees, but the breeze is still cold. And as much as he hates it, Jim has experience with vomiting kids.

He reaches out a hand and pushes Billy’s hair away from his face, sucking in a breath at the heat on his forehead.

“You think you’re finished?”

“Don’t know,” Billy groans, trying to twist away, out of Jim’s hold.

“We’re almost home; if you’re not going to throw up more, then let’s get back in the car.”

“No,” he groans, again

“Billy. You going to throw up right this second?”

Silence. Then, “No,” but it’s quiet.

“Okay. I’m not letting you stay out here on the ground. Come on, I’ll help you up.”

This time he doesn’t protest, just lets Jim put his hands underneath his armpits and heave him up, back into the car. He doesn’t bother with the seatbelt, they’re so close to the cabin and no one except them use this road anyway. Billy pulls his legs up, shoes on the edge of the seat, and leans his face down between his knees.

Jim parks outside the cabin, getting out first to explain to El what’s going on.

She must’ve heard the car approaching, because she’s waiting for him in the middle of the room, looking ready for a fight.

“Billy’s sick,” he says.

She tilts her head to the side. “Sick?”

“Yeah, he’s feeling ill. He’s got a fever, and the threw up. Like in that book we read a couple weeks ago?”

She nods, her eyes widening in recognition. To Jim’s knowledge, she’s never been sick. Be it because she spent the majority of her life in a sanitised lab, or because she’s got some freakishly strong immune system. Probably a combination of both, since she spent weeks out in the cold before she moved in with him, and didn’t have so much as a sniffle.

Still, Jim doesn’t want this to be her first introduction to feeling like crap, so he says, “You should stay in your room, so you don’t catch it and get sick, too.”

“Okay. Radio Max?”

Shit. Jim had forgotten about that. Billy still picks Max up and drives her to and from school. “Yeah, kiddo. Tell her to see if she can get a ride with Steve.”

El nods, going back to her room and closing the door behind her.

Jim turns around, is about to go back and help Billy out, when the front door opens and almost hits him in the face.

“Whoa!”

Billy doesn't seem to have heard him. He stands in the doorway for a moment, and then starts to topple forward. Jim reaches out, moves towards him, and Billy ends up leaning his burning forehead against his chest.

“Okay,” Jim says, arms hovering in the air above Billy's back. “Hey, kid? I'm going to help you up the stairs, okay?”

Billy hums, which is probably the closest to acknowledgement Jim's likely to get. He changes positions so he's got his arm around Billy's waist instead, and slowly, slowly, they start walking towards the stairs and up to the loft.

Before Billy, Jim had only had a ladder up there, and no railing, had used it as a storage space. But once it became clear Billy was moving in, he'd had El stay with Joyce while he hired a man to help him build a staircase and a railing up there, and then he'd assembled a bed and a dresser and a desk and chair, and had put a rug on the floor and called it a day.

Now, Billy's got a mirror on the dresser, a million bottles of cologne and hair shit and whatnot, piles of books on the floor along the wall - and Jim really ought to invest in shelves. They could make a day out of it, a little bonding time. Maybe - and band posters on the sloping ceiling, his leather jacket thrown over the back of the chair and a couple weights underneath the window.

He helps Billy to the bed, reaching for the duvet while the kid kicks his shoes off. Billy climbs up on the bed and lies down on his side, grabbing for one of the pillows and curling his body around it. Jim shakes his covers out and then drapes them over Billy's trembling form. He really ought to change clothes, get out of his jeans and into a pair of pyjamas, but Billy seems too tired to do it himself, and Jim's really not interested in getting a fist to the face if he tried to do it for him. Better to let him sleep now and change later.

On his way down the stairs, he thinks that he should probably get Billy a bucket or something in case the kid needs to throw up again.

"Max asked what was wrong with Billy," El says, and Jim looks up to see her sitting on the couch, a pair of stray curls falling down over her eyes. "Is he okay?"

"His school nurse thought he had the stomach flu," Jim explains, going over towards the bathroom to wash his hands before he spreads any germs down here where they can get to El. "I think he's sleeping now. It's probably for the best."

When Sara was feeling particularly bad, Jim always tried to read her to sleep, hoping the pain in her body would be lessened by the time she woke back up.

He dries his hands on the towel, and opens up the medicine cabinet they keep in the bathroom. He's got a first aid kit there, but reaches the startling conclusion that he doesn't actually own much in term of medicine, since neither he nor El really get sick. And he doesn't actually know what he ought to be giving Billy, either. Tylenol? Maybe? Sara never had the stomach flu.

“El!”

She comes bounding over, looking at him with those big eyes of hers.

“I’m going shopping,” he says, closing the cabinet. “Keep... Keep an eye, or, an ear, on Billy, but don’t go up there, ok? I’ll be back soon.”

“Soon?” she says, and while her expression doesn’t change, he can hear it in her voice. He’s told her he’ll be home ‘soon’ too many times before, so many times she ended up running away.

“Soon. I *promise*. If I’m not back soon, then call Joyce or radio the others, okay?”

She nods, and goes back to the couch, turning on the TV and zapping to the next channel without touching the remote.

He’s going to go see the best parent he knows. Who so happens to also be the only person who’s advice he trusts.

—

There are four people in the queue to the register at Melvald's. Jim wishes he could use the Hi-yes-I-am-the-Chief-of-Police card to get them all to go away, but even he knows that's not really how it works.

So he waits, impatiently, tapping his foot and glaring at anyone who looks over at him, until they're all gone and he can get up to talk to Joyce.

"Joyce," he says.

She looks at him, amused. "Hop."

"I need help. Billy... Billy's sick. He passed out in school this morning, Jonathan found him, by the way, so you might get to hear about this when you get home, too, but the principal called me and the nurse thinks he's got a stomach bug, and I *don't know what to do*. Help me."

Joyce looks sympathetic. "Poor thing," she says, and Jim wonders if she's talking about him or Billy. "Alright, well, he's going to be feeling like shit. And he's probably throwing up a lot, so it's going to be hard for him to keep things down, but you need to keep him hydrated, even if he probably won't want to."

She waves one of her coworkers down to take her place, and walks around the register to lead him down an aisle.

“Bland foods,” she says, and hands him a packet of rice, bananas, applesauce. “And potatoes and toast, too, but I guess you have those at home already?”

Jim nods, and she turns to look at him, hands on her hips. She’s so tiny but so fierce, it’s like watching an angry swan. “No caffeine, no sugary foods, no dairy, no fruit juice, nothing with lots of fat, which you should probably avoid cooking at all because the smell might make him nauseous. And absolutely no alcohol.”

“He’s seventeen, I’m not giving him alcohol no matter how he’s feeling!”

“Good. Just wanted to make sure. Next,” she says, leading him down another aisle. “Sports drinks are good because they help replenish electrolytes, and ginger tea is good, too. If he refuses to drink anything, then get him ice chips.”

She leads him back to the register, taking her coworker’s place, and Jim pays for everything she’s handed him.

“Thank you, Joyce.”

She smiles brightly at him, handing him a plastic bag with everything he’s bought. “Don’t worry, Hop. Just go and take care of your kids.”

His next stop is the pharmacy, where he’s warned to not give Billy any aspirin and convinced to buy a microwaveable heating pad, as

those apparently help with pain. He thinks that El might eventually need it, too, once her period starts. How he's going to handle that he doesn't know.

He's feeling pretty satisfied with himself when he gets home. Up until the point where he sees El throw the front door open and rush out to meet him.

"What's-"

"Billy's crying," she says, coming to a stop in front of him. "I think he threw up again but you told me not to go up, so I didn't, and then he started crying, and I didn't know what to do so I looked for you in the Void and I saw you were close so I've been waiting in the window."

"Okay. El? I want you to go in your room. Take the TV with you, if you want. I'm going to help Billy."

She nods, and turns around, running back inside the house. Jim follows her, and hears it the second he steps inside. Quiet sobs. He leaves the bags from Melvald's and the pharmacy on the kitchen table while El moves the TV to her room, before he walks across the room and up the stairs, taking two steps at a time.

Billy's on the floor by his bed, curled in on himself with hands fisted in the duvet on the floor next to him. He's taking short, panicked gulps of air. There's the vile smell of vomit in the air, and Jim thinks he can see some of it on Billy's sheets. He wants to kick himself. He forgot the goddamn bucket.

He takes a step forward, about to hurry to his side, but stops in his tracks when Billy flinches and tries to push himself back against the bed. His hands twist the duvet, and he tries to curl in on himself, lowering his head and staring down at the floor.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry, I’m going to clean it up, I’m sorry,” he mumbles. “It won’t happen again, I didn’t mean to... I’m sorry, I’m sorry sir...”

It’s the ‘sir’ that throws him off, that clues him in. Billy doesn’t realise where he is right now. He doesn’t realise that Jim isn’t Neil Hargrove.

And he’s thrown up on the covers, and now he’s afraid that Jim will hit him for it.

Jim takes a few slow steps closer, trying to ignore the pang in his chest when Billy whimpers, and lowers himself to the floor, just a few feet away from Billy.

He wishes Joyce was here. She’s better at this than he is. Jim’s not good at being soft.

Be he tries, tries to make his voice as kind as possible, as though Billy’s an injured little animal he’s trying not to spook. Trying to gain its trust. “Billy? Hey, kid, can you look at me? Please?” he adds, because he doubt Neil Hargrove has ever said ‘please’ to Billy.

It takes a couple tries, a minute or so of gentle coaxing, but eventually Billy looks up at him, eyes big and blue and fever glazed, tears still steaming down his cheeks.

“Hey,” Jim breathes. “Good, kid. Good. It’s Jim. Jim Hopper. Hop.”

Billy looks at him, and Jim is expecting for him to say something, but then he just bends over with his arms around his stomach, keening.

Jim pushes himself forward, his knees protesting the rough movement, and reaches out for Billy. This time, the kid doesn’t protest, instead he goes willingly, curling up against him with Jim’s arms around him, sobbing into his shirt. He strokes his hand over Billy’s curls, and thinks his forehead’s gone even hotter. The kid’s shivering in his arms.

“Hurts,” Billy gasps, and Jim holds him a little tighter.

“Stomach cramps?” he asks, feeling Billy nod against him. “I got you something that might help against that. But first, we really ought to get you into some more comfortable clothes. I’m going to help you up, okay?”

Billy nods again, so Jim keeps his arms around him as he pushes them both up to standing. He takes the kid to his desk chair, letting him sit down there while he goes to rummage through the closet.

“Lower drawer on the left,” Billy mutters, so Jim opens that one.

He gets out a pair of pyjama pants and a soft cotton the shirt, handing them to Billy before going over to his bed. He'd like to offer the kid a shower, but he's afraid he'd slip and hit his head and die, so that's decidedly out of question.

There's no vomit on the sheets or the pillowcases, but Billy's been sweating so they're all cross anyway. Jim decides to strip the whole bed, bundling everything up and taking it with him down the stairs.

He's trying to be quick about it, because he wants Billy back in bed, but it's a lot of bedding and he needs to get out clean, fresh ones, opting for a thicker duvet, too, and...

And when he turns around, El is moving a little pile of bedclothes towards him through the air.

"Thank you," he says, and she smiles, wiping away a small trail of blood from her nostril and closing her door behind her as she goes back to her room.

He takes the fresh bedding back up to Billy, glancing over at the kid's shivering form before quickly placing everything down and pulling the covers back so Billy can get in easily.

He doesn't say anything when Jim comes over to help him back to bed. At least he seems to have been able to change without incident.

“Don’t fall asleep yet,” Jim says as Billy lies back down. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

He goes back down, stopping at the kitchen table and getting out everything he’d bought.

He starts with the heating pad, reading the instructions on it before plunking it into the microwave, the sound of grains sloshing around inside it as he places it down. While it’s warming up, he finds the thermometer from the medicine cabinet, and puts one of sports drinks Joyce made him get on a tray. When the microwave dings, the heating pad and the thermometer both join it on the tray.

He takes the tray with him up to Billy, placing it on the nightstand. He’s turned on his side, away from Jim, so he reaches out a hand to put it on Billy’s shoulder.

Billy whimpers, tries to shrug him off.

“Hey, Billy. What did I say? No sleeping yet.”

Billy turns around so he’s on his back, blinking blearily up at him, a grimace on his face.

“Here,” Jim says, handing him the thermometer. “I’m going to get you a bucket in case you need to throw up again.”

He goes to do so, coming back with it to see Billy holding out the thermometer to him. 102.

“Shit, kid. Okay, come on, you gotta drink something.” He sits down on the edge of the bed, putting one arm underneath Billy’s shoulders and helping him up to lean against Jim. He hands him one of the sports drinks. “Here. Joyce said these help.”

Billy takes it, his hand trembling as he brings it up to his lips. He seems exhausted by the time he’s finished, having drunk maybe half of it. Jim smooths his hair down, and helps him lay back. He reaches for the heating pad and pulls the covers back, putting it down on Billy’s shirt clad belly. The muscles underneath jump, and Billy grunts, sucking in a breath.

“Does it help?” Jim asks, frowning.

“Maybe,” Billy groans out. Then, looking more sincere than Jim’s ever seen him, he whispers, “Thank you.”

Jim pats his arm, standing back up and tucking Billy in. “No problem, kid. I’ll be downstairs. Shout if you need me. Or...” he bends down, picking up one of Billy’s dirty socks. “Throw this one over the railing and I’ll hopefully see it,” he says, placing it down on the edge of the tray.

Billy lets out a huff that almost sounds like a chuckle, and Jim counts it as a win.

He leaves him up there to rest, and stops in the bathroom to wash his hands. He throws Billy's dirty sheets into the washer, and washes his hands again.

He ends up getting El out of her room, helping her take the TV back to the living room area, and sitting down watching it with her for an hour or so.

Then, they move to the kitchen table and he helps her with the homework she'd done that morning. He's been trying to homeschool her, since she's starting high school in a couple of months and he doesn't want her to be completely behind. Thankfully she's a smart kid, so he thinks she's going to be fine.

As it's nearing dinner time, he stands up and goes over to the freezer, trying to figure out what to make. No greasy food, Joyce had said. Chicken? And rice?

He takes the chicken out and puts it on a plate in the microwave to let it unfreeze a little.

About an hour later, dinner is ready, and El is eating. Having put some food on his own plate, Jim goes up to the loft to wake Billy.

The heating pad has fallen to the floor, Billy's legs tangled in the duvet. There's a light sheen of sweat on his face, but he's still shivering.

Jim reaches out a hand, shaking his shoulder lightly, until Billy's eyes flutter open.

"Hey. I made dinner."

Billy groans, starting to turn his back on him.

"No, hey-" Jim says, stopping him with a hand on his arm and turning him back to face him. "I need to get some medicine in you, but I'm not letting you have it on an empty stomach. Just some rice, okay? And a banana."

Billy sighs, a stray curl flying away from his face in the blow of air. Jim decides to take that as concession.

He takes the sports drink from before on his way down, and smiles when he sees it's empty. Back in the kitchen, he throws it away before getting a bowl, filling it with rice. And a small piece of chicken, in case Billy will want to eat it, too. He grabs the banana, and takes it all with him back up.

Billy's managed to sit up, leaning back against the headboard. Jim hands him the bowl and cutlery, and puts the banana down on the nightstand.

Billy looks doubtfully at the food in front of him.

“You don’t have to finish everything,” Jim says. “I’ll be back in half an hour? Just try to eat as much as you can, alright?”

Billy nods minutely. Jim gets the feeling he isn’t really listening.

He sighs, and turns around to walk back down. El’s still eating, so Jim sits down at the table with her.

“Billy okay?”

“He’s eating,” Jim says, because that’s really the only positive he can come up with. At least, Jim hopes he’s eating.

“Good.”

“Yeah, kiddo. Good.”

“Can I see him?”

“El-“

“Fine,” she grumbles. “Max is worried.”

“Tell Max I’m taking care of her brother and he’s going to be fine. He’s just sick.”

Once they’re both finished, he takes their plates and goes over to wash them in the sink. By the time he’s done, he figures it’s time to go back and check on Billy, so he grabs a glass of water and another sports drink, stopping by the medicine cabinet for the stuff he got at the pharmacy.

Billy’s curled up again when he gets there, lying on his side and following Jim with his eyes as he steps up to his nightstand.

He’s eaten half the piece of chicken and most of the rice, the banana peel folded in half in the bowl. Jim’s strangely proud of him.

“How you feeling?”

“Cold. Head hurts,” Billy says, closing his eyes.

“Okay, well. Sit back up for me, will you. I’ve got water and pills.”

“Never thought a cop would be offering me drugs.”

“Shut up, kid. It’s supposed to make you feel better.”

“Yeah it is.”

Jim chokes on a laugh. “You’re a little shit, you know that?”

“It’s not the worst I’ve been called,” Billy says, opening his eyes and pushing himself up to sitting. Jim’s mirth dies.

“I’m sorry, Billy.”

“Yeah, yeah. Hand me my drugs, Chief.”

A small smile pulls at his lips, and he hands Billy the glass of water first, then the medicine. Billy swallows them like he’s taking a shot, and Jim really doesn’t want to think about that.

He takes the glass back from him and watches as Billy lies back down, pulling the covers up to his chin.

“Goodnight, Billy.”

“Night, Hop.”

He's woken in the early hours of the morning to a broken off scream.

Jim's first thought is *'El'* and his second is *'Oh shit'* when he realises the noise came from above him. El's got a door to her bedroom, so hopefully she's still asleep, but Jim's just got a piece of cloth hanging in the doorway. He's never been as glad for it as he is now, rushing out of bed and taking the steps two at a time to get to Billy.

The kid's tangled up in his covers, moaning and whimpering with sweat clinging to his skin. His legs kick out as though he's fighting some invincible attacker, and he cries out, curling up into a little ball and sobbing.

"Billy? Kid? Hey..." Jim says. He doesn't know if he's even awake. "Billy, Billy, come on."

He sits down on the edge of the bed, and reaches out for Billy. His skin's clammy, and he's too warm. Unfocused blue eyes open, and then Billy's lurching to the side, hands grabbing for the bucket. Jim's afraid he's going to choke, attempting to throw up like that, so he moves closer. Billy whimpers when he pulls him up to sitting, leaning him back against Jim, hands trying to push him away, but Jim's not buckling. He gets the bucket under Billy's chin just as he feels him go rigid, and a second later he's bending forwards, vomit spewing out of his mouth.

He's crying the whole time, crying and whimpering and letting out little sounds of pain. Jim strokes his hair, pulls it back with one hand,

the other holding the bucket steady.

“You’re okay. You’re okay, kid, you’re okay.”

“Hurts,” Billy says, spitting one last time. “Hurts so bad.”

“Okay,” Jim says, trying to sound reassuring. Really, he’s starting to panic. “Okay. What hurts? Stomach?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I mean- *Everything* hurts, but *shit*, shit, ow...”

Jesus Christ. “Okay, Billy? Did the heating pad help?”

“I-I guess...”

“Right. Okay,” Jim says, and puts the bucket down on the floor. He lowers Billy back down and stands up. The heating pad’s down on the floor, halfway under the bed. Jim picks it up and reaches for the bucket, taking both of them with him down the stairs.

He rinses the bucket in the bathroom before going over to the kitchen. He calls Joyce while the pad’s in the microwave.

She answers the phone with a yawn. “*Joyce Byers speaking.*”

Jim glances at the clock to see that it's just past 6 am. "Hi, Joyce. Sorry for waking you."

She sounds more alert when she hears it's him. *"It's okay. What's wrong?"*

"Billy's feeling like shit, and I just... I don't want El getting it, too, and I don't want to leave him alone, so could she maybe stay with you for the weekend?"

*"Sure. I'll be there in half an hour."*

The microwave dings and Jim wedges the phone in between his shoulder and ear as he goes to take out the pad. "You don't have to get here immediately if--"

*"I'm already awake, Hop, it's really no bother."*

"Alright," he says. Thank you."

*"Of course. Go take care of your kids now."*

He hangs up, smiling a little to himself.

Billy's fallen back into a restless sleep by the time Jim gets back. He pulls back the covers just enough to be able to place the heating pad by Billy's belly, the kid's shivering body curling towards it.

He goes back down, knocking on El's door before inching it open.

"El?" he calls, and when she doesn't react, he steps inside.

He shakes her shoulder, gently, and her eyes flutter open, turning to look at him with wrinkled brows.

"Hey. Morning, kid. What do you say about having a sleepover at Joyce's place?"

Her frown deepens. "Can Mike come?"

"That's... up to Joyce. But yeah, sure. And Max, too."

"You're being weird. Why?"

Jim sighs. "Billy's still sick, and I just don't want you to get sick too."

El sits up straight. "Bad? Worse?"

“Yeah. Yeah, kid. He’s feeling worse.”

“Hospital?”

“No!” *I hope.* “I just...”

“Don’t want him to be alone.” She nods to herself. “Good. Go.”

He raises his eyebrows, amused. “You’re throwing me out?”

She motions at her backpack, resting against the wall by her dresser. “I need to change. And you need to go back.”

Jim stands back up and leaves the room, grabbing last week’s paper from the coffee table and trying not to think about how he’s following the instructions of an almost fourteen year old girl. He goes back up to the loft and drags Billy’s chair closer to the bed.

As he watches Billy sleep, he hears El walk around downstairs. A car pulls up, she opens the front door, and Joyce’s soft tones filter in. Then the door closes, the car pulls away, and Jim’s alone with Billy.

He’s curled up, shivering and seemingly in pain even while asleep. It hurts a little that Billy didn’t tell him that he was feeling sick, that it got so bad he passed out at school, but Jim supposed he can’t really blame Billy. The kid’s whole life has changed in only a few weeks.

Maybe Jim ought to give that nice high school nurse a call, ask her what the school counsellor's like. Billy could go while Max has AV Club, instead of smoking in the car park while he waits for her. He probably needs to talk to someone. Someone professional, whom he can both talk about his dad and complain about Jim to, who'll take him seriously and won't be biased because they're raising him now.

And maybe he can get some pointers on how to talk to Billy, too. It shouldn't be as hard as it is, because Jim's got Joyce who's raising a boy Billy's age, and Jim was not too dissimilar to Billy when he was young.

But Jonathan is different from Billy, and Jim might have gotten into his fair share of fights as a teen, might have gotten into shouting matches with his old men, but it never got as bad as Billy's life. Jim mostly skipped classes, smoked with Joyce, and tried to do his best to get out of Hawkins.

Sometimes, he wonders what would have happened if he hadn't left town. If he'd started dating Joyce after that chaste kiss they'd shared in sophomore year, the fourth kiss he'd ever had. If he's been here earlier, and Joyce would have had someone she knew she could trust to turn to instead of staying with Lonnie.

But he doesn't regret marrying Diane, even though it hurt for years after they divorced. He doesn't regret having had Sarah, even though his heart broke when she died.

He's brought out of his musings by movement from the bed, and when Jim looks up, he sees Billy moving gingerly to swing his legs

over the edge.

“Hey. Hey, where do you think you’re going?”

Billy startles, as though he wasn’t aware of Jim’s presence until now. “Bathroom,” he mumbles, but the way he says it almost makes it sound like a question.

“Okay,” Jim says, cursing himself for not thinking about that earlier. “Come on then.” He moves to place himself with one arm around Billy’s waist, hoisting the kid up to standing and keeping him there when his legs give out. “One step at a time.”

Together, they make their way down the stairs to the bathroom. Jim stops him before he can get in.

“Don’t lock the door.”

Billy rolls his eyes at him. Jim’s kind of impressed he doesn’t pass out from it. “Pervert,” he says, so lowly Jim doubts he was meant to hear.

“Hey. If I hear a thud, I don’t want to have to break down the door.”

Despite it all, Jim’s kind of expecting to hear the lock turn when Billy closes the door anyway. He counts it as a win when he doesn’t.

And there's no sound of a body falling to the floor either, Billy just comes stumbling out, leaning heavily on the door. Jim moves to take his place beside him again, helping him back up the stairs and to his bed. He doesn't like the heat emanating from the kid's body.

While Billy climbs back into bed, curling up underneath the covers, Jim reaches over for the thermometer still at his nightstand and hands it to him once he's settled.

Billy groans, but takes it. Jim gives him an encouraging smile before going back down into the kitchen.

He takes out a bowl and fills it with cool water, stopping to grab a small, clean towel on his way up.

Billy's wrapped himself back up in the blankets, visibly shivering. He avoids Jim's gaze when he reaches for the thermometer on the mattress beside him.

103.

Jesus Christ.

"Shit, kid," Jim says. "No wonder you feel like shit."

Billy scoffs, but it almost sounds like a laugh.

“Okay, this is going to feel a little cold...” Jim says, sitting down on the edge of the bed and dipping the towel in the bowl, wringing it out and smoothing Billy’s hair down and away before he lays it on his forehead.

Billy flinches and reaches up to remove the towel, but Jim catches his wrist and pulls it back down.

“C-Cold-“ Billy stutters, teeth shattering and shivering increasing for a second.

“I know. But we’ve gotta cool you down. It’s this or I’m dragging you back down to the bathroom and stuffing you into the shower, clothes and all.”

He gives Billy a few seconds to react to that, see if he’d against all odds would prefer it.

Billy doesn’t say anything to that.

“Right,” Jim says, standing back up and putting the bowl down on the floor. “I’m going to go get you some medicine, don’t move.”

He thinks he hears Billy murmur, “Where would I even go?” when Jim starts towards the stairs, but it’s said so quietly he doesn’t bother acknowledging he’d heard.

He grabs the medicine he picked up at the pharmacy, a glass of water, and another of Joyce's sports drinks and takes it all up to Billy.

The heat from him has almost dried the towel by the time Jim puts it back in the bowl, and not for the first time, he considers just taking Billy to the hospital.

But that feels a bit too much like admitting defeat, like failing at parenting, like betrayal. Because Billy isn't that sick, not yet, and Jim knows Billy doesn't like hospitals.

"Here, kid," Jim says, helping Billy up to sitting so he can swallow the pills. His hand shakes so hard Jim's afraid he's going to spill the water all over himself, so he keeps his hand on the glass, holds it steady while Billy drinks. He seems completely exhausted by the time they're finished, and only lets out a whimper when Jim puts the cold towel back on his forehead.

He exchanges it once more before Billy's back asleep. Jim's stomach growls, reminding him he hasn't eaten since last night.

He makes himself lunch, and eats it in the kitchen even though he doesn't like having to leave Billy out of sight for so long, because he doesn't want to risk triggering Billy's nausea.

Afterwards, he finds himself back in the chair by Billy's bed, trying to solve last week's crossword.

Hours later, when Jim's had a sandwich and read the whole paper twice, when he's in the middle of making up assignments for El to do throughout the week, a strangled sound makes him look up.

Billy's on his way to twisting himself up in his sheets again, sweat glistening and making his hair stick to his face. He lets out that pitiful little sound again, mouth opening in a breathless gasp, and it's so weak, and so heartbreakingly young.

Jim knows he's seeing the beginnings of another fever dream, so he throws himself out of his chair to take his seat on the edge of the bed.

"Hey. Hey, Billy. Wake up." He tries to gently shake Billy's shoulder, but all that gets him is a muffled groan.

"No..." Billy moans, and to Jim's horror, tears start to fall past his closed eyelids. "No, no, I- Please..."

"Billy, hey. Come on," Jim says, hand landing on his check and immediately pulling back at the boiling heat he finds there. "Okay," he says, more to himself than Billy.

Billy may not be awake, might not even be particularly coherent if he had been, but Jim needs to know. He reaches for the thermometer, lifts Billy up by his shoulders so he's slightly more upright, leaning back against Jim, and pops the thermometer in his mouth.

He drags a hand across his face when he sees the reading. 104. *Shit.*  
Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit-

Billy whimpers, whines, legs kicking out and bending at the knees.  
His eyes flutter open, unseeing and hazy.

There's the distinct sound of a gag, and Jim prides himself on his reflexes as he grabs the bucket and positions it underneath Billy's chin.

But nothing comes up. Jim's not surprised, considering Billy's already thrown up once and hasn't eaten anything today. He listens to Billy whimper and gag, for minutes on end, before he puts the bucket back down on the floor. Billy whines, reaching after it with one trembling hand, but Jim's certain he won't throw anything up.

He hushes him, the way he'd do for Sara, and El, after a nightmare, and puts his hand on Billy's head, leading him down to rest against Jim's chest.

Billy resists at first, shifting to look up at him. His eyes are big and scared and watery, but he doesn't move away, and Jim hopes it is because he trusts Jim not to hurt him, and not because he's feeling too weak to even try. He must be looking for something in Jim's expression, and he must find it, because he leans back by himself.

Billy lets out a shaky breath, and then he's full on sobbing. His arms wound around his stomach, and Jim figures it must be cramping, making him feel nauseous even with nothing in it.

He'd filled the bowl with fresh water a while back, and he reaches for the towel to dip it back in now, placing it on Billy's forehead and not caring when it makes his own shirt grow damp. He starts carding his fingers through Billy's sweaty hair. Billy's breath stutters in between sobs, and Jim's about to stop, but then Billy relaxes a little, leaning more heavily against him.

Jim doesn't know if Billy had friends he went to, back in California, when he felt bad, but he thinks it must be hard for Billy to ask for, and accept, the comfort he so desperately needs. God knows Jim had a few miserable years after Diane divorced him, and then he was an adult, not a teenager.

"You're okay," he whispers. "Hey. Hey, kid. You're safe. You're safe here."

Billy's sobs get a little louder, but Jim doesn't think it's in a bad way. He wets the towel again, pressing it back against Billy's forehead.

"Shh, shh, hey. I've got you, kid. I've got you."

Jim doesn't know what to do. He doesn't know how to make it better, but he thinks that all he can do is let it run its course and try to keep Billy as comfortable as possible while it lasts. So he stays where he is, and tries to cool Billy's head, and combs his hand through blonde curls.

---

Billy's fever goes back down to 103 a few hours later. Two hours more, and then he's blinking slightly less unfocused eyes open.

Jim's trying to force water on him.

"If you don't drink, you're going to end up dehydrated. And then I'll take you to the hospital."

"Hurts," Billy whispers, and Jim looks at him with what he hopes is obvious sympathy.

"I know. But you're sweating out everything I've managed to get you to drink. And you need liquids, Billy. You're going to dry out. Like a raisin."

Billy wrinkles his nose at that, but it's followed by a tiny nod, and he lets Jim manoeuvre him so he can take couple sips.

Billy doesn't go back to sleep, just clenches his eyes shut with a grimace, hands going back to his belly as though he's expecting his insides to fall out any second.

Jim spends perhaps half an hour watching him in silence, before he

sighs, gaze drifting over to the piles upon piles of novels Billy's got.

"You want a book or something?"

"I just want to sleep," Billy whispers, groaning. Jim winches in sympathy, and takes a minute to ponder the offer he's about to make.

"Would it... would it maybe help distract you if I read something? Out loud?" It used to help Sara.

It's quiet for so long Jim's starting to suspect Billy will tell him to fuck off. But then,

"Third book on the fourth pile away from the window."

It's a copy of *The Hobbit*. A well worn copy. The kid can pretend all he wants, but he's a nerd, just as much as El's friends are.

He stops to wet the towel and put it back on Billy's forehead, the kid's eyes fluttering closed, before he takes a seat in the chair and flips to the first chapter.

He sits there and he reads, until the pained grimace on Billy's face eases up and fades away into sleep. He's even got a small smile playing on his lips, and Jim knows Billy's angry and volatile and sad, but right now, he mostly just looks innocent.

That evening, he makes himself dinner and considers waking Billy up to eat, but the thought of the slightly betrayed look in his eyes every time Jim wakes him enough to drink more water or get him to swallow some pills is enough that he decides against it. He doesn't want to fight.

At twenty minutes past midnight, Billy's fever breaks. His clothes and hair cling to him, the sheets sticky and his skin clammy, but he's going to be alright.

Feeling reassured, Jim breathes a sigh of relief and goes down to his own bedroom. He falls asleep as soon as his head hits the pillow.

—

Billy sleeps until noon the next day.

Jim's in the kitchen, on his third cup of coffee, when Billy comes down the staircase, leaning heavily against the railing.

Jim looks up and meets his gaze. Billy looks a bit like a deer caught in headlights, and Jim gets why when his eyes shift to land on the change of clothes and towel he's got bundled up against his side.

“I won’t lock the door,” is all Billy says, voice quiet and gravely, worn thin from ten amount of time he’s spent retching these past two days.

Jim nods, trusting him to not do anything stupid. Like go take a shower when he’s close to passing out. After all, Jim really doubts Billy wants to risk Jim bursting in on him, naked and unconscious, and he figures he must be feeling really greasy by now.

The door closes gently behind him, and the lock doesn’t turn. A minute or so later, Jim hears the shower turn on.

He takes the chance to grab clean sheets and climbs the stairs to strip Billy’s bed again. The loft reeks of that oppressive stench of illness, mixed with the still lingering smell of vomit. Jim opens Billy’s window to air it out before going back downstairs.

Billy emerges a little while later, dressed in a fresh pair of sweat pants and a washed out t-shirt. He’s still shivering, but his eyes are clear, and Jim thinks that if he’s got a fever, it’s probably a low grade one.

He stops him from going back upstairs, and motions towards the couch. “I opened the window upstairs. Stay down here for a bit; you need to eat something.”

Billy pads over to the couch, socked feet soft on the floor, and Jim puts the blanket over his shoulders when he sits down. He goes over to the kitchen and pops two slices of bread into the toaster, grabbing a sports drink and handing it to Billy before going back to wait for

the bread to finish.

He just puts some butter on it, trying not to aggravate Billy's stomach. If they manage to get through the day without Billy throwing up, Jim is going to see it as a giant win. If they manage to get through this whole sickness without El or him catching it, then Jim will give himself a gold star for parenting done right. And he means that. He keeps stickers with gold stars for El's assignments. Positive reinforcement, and all that.

"Here," he says, handing Billy a plate with his two slices of toast, and sitting down beside him. He motions at the TV with the remote. "You want to watch something?"

Billy shrugs. "Sure."

Jim nods, turning it on and zapping until they land on some rerun of some show Jim doesn't know.

They sit in silence for a while, Billy eating his toasts and Jim trying to pretend he isn't hyper aware of every move the kid makes.

"Listen," he eventually says. "We need to... We should talk. I'm not good at... this. Talking, but--"

"Then don't," Billy interrupts him, gaze trained on the TV. "You don't have to say anything. I get it."

“Oh,” Jim breathes. He relaxes back against the cushions. “Alright.”

“Yeah.”

The silence this time lasts less than five minutes. It's just enough time for his own imaginary Jiminy Cricket, who conspicuously sounds a lot like Joyce, to go through the interaction and remind his sometimes idiotic brain that he can't keep running from emotional conversations just because he's uncomfortable. He needs to have this talk with Billy. He has no clue what the kid thinks that he 'gets' and Jim's kind of worried he won't like the answer if he asks.

He straightens back up on the couch, grabbing the remote and turning the volume down low. “Alright, no. No. We need to talk. I need to talk, and I need you to listen.”

Billy doesn't say anything, but Jim sees how he tenses up and visibly swallows.

He takes a deep breath before speaking. “I feel like this conversation has been long overdue. You moved in... weeks ago. And I'm afraid I haven't been clear enough on what it means, staying here with us. This is... This is supposed to be your home now, okay? And I know you're not used to this, and it's going to take you time, but... If you're hungry, you can help yourself to whatever in the kitchen. If you can't finish something, put it in the fridge for later. You don't have to stay up on the loft from the moment you get home. If you go to a party, and you get drunk, because you're a teenager and you're going to, then I'd rather you called me to come pick you up than for you to crash into a tree. And I need you to know that if you ever feel sick,

you can just tell me and I'll call you in. You don't have to try to power through."

Billy lowers his head to stare at his lap, trembling fingers pulling the blanket tighter around himself.

Jim decides to power on. He thinks Joyce would be proud of him. Diane would, too. "I get that you're not about to start seeing me as your dad, now, but you kind of are my kid. And that means that I care about you. And I'm going to ground you if you do something stupid, I'll put you on babysitting duty instead of letting you go out to party, but I won't ever hurt you. Okay? Never. And I won't let anyone else do so, either. No one's going to get to put their hands on you, alright?"

"What if I put mine on them first?" Billy says quietly, and it sounds a bit like a challenge, like he's trying to say 'What about now, Chief? You're still not going to hit me? Haha, got you!'

"Then I'll listen to your reason for doing it, and then I might take your car away and have you deal with being dropped of and picked up by your foster dad, the Chief of Police, for a week or so."

Billy burrows deeper into his blanket at that, pulling his legs up onto the couch.

"But this all also means that I want to know what goes on with you, alright? With your life. I want to know if you're struggling in some class, or if you're proud of an assignment you've done. If something fun happened at school. How basketball practice is going. All of that.

You're not a ghost, Billy. You survived your dad. I want you to live now."

Jim thinks he hears Billy's breath hitch. For a beat, everything is silent and still. Then Billy takes one of the decorative throw pillows Joyce got him when he first moved into the cabin, and puts it down on Jim's lap. He lowers himself down until he's lying curled up with his head resting on the pillow.

"I'm tired," he whispers. "Can you put the TV back on?"

Jim's a little speechless. But he grabs the remote and turns the volume back up, and then, carefully, he places his hand on Billy's still slightly-too-warm arm, and rubs it.

He thinks this is real trust, what's happening right now. Billy's thinking clearly, his brain isn't fogged by a fever haze, and he's willingly seeking comfort, trusting Jim not to hurt him or push him away.

"I've got a game in two weeks," Billy says. "If you want to go."

Jim grins. "Yeah, kid. I want to go."

## 2. POV Billy

### Notes for the Chapter:

If you've also read Hop's perspective, I would love if you'd tell me which perspective you preferred!

Disclaimer:

I don't own "Stranger Things".

Billy's been feeling like shit since around halfway through last period. His body aches, he's been feeling that general weak way you get when you're sick, and his head's pounding. When the Chief's weird little daughter asked him what was wrong with him, he'd just sighed and told her he had a headache and to leave him alone. She'd frowned, but had ultimately just gone over to the couch to watch whatever it was little girls watched.

Billy had pushed his tired body up the stairs to the loft.

He'd been pleasantly surprised to see the Chief had actually got him a real bed and a desk and dresser. That he'd helped Billy carry his weights up the stairs and hadn't said anything at the amount of books he took with him. The loft has its benefits. It's bigger than Billy's room ever was, be it in his childhood home, or Max' house they moved into, or the house on Cherry. It just doesn't have a door, so Billy's pretty certain Hop can hear most of everything Billy does. He can't really listen to music without headphones. And it's weirdly cold during the winter and will probably be freakishly hot and humid during the summer.

He plops down on his bed and stays there, an arm over his eyes, until the Chief comes home and finishes dinner, calling for him to come

down.

Billy's not really hungry, and the smell of the sausages the Chief made are making his stomach turn. But he sits down and puts a little potato on his plate, one of the smallest sausages he can find, and a few slices of tomato. He doesn't want to risk being shouted at because he doesn't appreciate the food being put in front of him.

But it's hard to eat, because Billy's got literally no appetite. He's mostly pushing the food around, trying to cut it into smaller pieces and regretting taking more than one piece of everything. He's hoping against hope that Hopper won't notice.

All for nothing, it seems. "Something wrong with the food?"

Billy looks up at him across the table, slowly, because he's heard those words directed at him before, in a similar gruff, male voice. There has never been a correct answer to that question.

But Hop isn't Neil Hargrove, which Billy tries to remind himself of daily. So he says, "No," and uses his fork to stab a piece of potato without looking. He'd been aiming for the sausage, so he ends up using too much force, the sound the metal makes as it collides with the porcelain ringing in his ears.

"Something happen at school?"

Billy sees Jane look up and stare at her dad. She's a fun kid, although

she doesn't say much. Billy's got two little girls in his life now, and one of them talks too much and the other one too little. He's pretty certain Max uses Jane to keep tabs on him, too, because she's asked him stuff when he drives her to school that she shouldn't really have been aware of.

"School's fine," he answers, looking back down at his plate. He takes one of the small sausage pieces he's cut up and brings it to his mouth. It tastes like sawdust, and like it'll never end. He has to force himself to swallow.

"You feeling alright?" Hopper asks, and Billy can't really deal with this anymore. He lets go off his fork, hears it clatter to the table, and looks up to give the Chief his full attention.

"What do you want?"

He has the goddamn nerve to look away from Billy, focusing on his own food. Billy wishes that's what he'd do the whole time. "What do you mean?"

Billy leans forward, licking his lips. "What's with the questions? What is this? Am I being interrogated, *Chief*?"

Jane looks up too, turning her head to look at Hopper.

"No," Hopper answers, and Billy can tell he wants to say more but he isn't, he's dragging the time out and making both him and Jane wait

for him to finish another bite. “We’ve been eating for about, twenty minutes, half an hour, maybe. And I’ve just asked you three questions during the span of that time. *Normal* questions.”

Fuck him. Billy’s tired, his head aches, he’s not hungry, and those questions have never been fucking normal in Billy’s whole damn life.

But he can’t exactly say any of that, so he shuts up, presses his lips together to not let any words escape, and picks his fork back up. He’s going to eat, he’s going to fucking finish everything, even if it’s only out of defiance and stubbornness.

But it’s hard. It’s so hard, because every single bite feels like it’s ten times bigger than it is, getting stuck in his throat as he tries to swallow.

Distantly, he hears Hopper sigh.

“You don’t have to finish eating if you’re not hungry, Billy.”

Okay, yeah. That’s it. Billy’s not going to deal with this anymore. Fuck it. Fuck everything. He pushes his chair back and grabs his plate, not bothering to look up at either Hopper or Jane, and leaves it on the kitchen counter. He’s angry, always quick to irritability, and he makes it known as he stomps up the stairs.

Halfway up, he realises it’s making him seem like a goddamn toddler throwing a tantrum because he didn’t want to eat his veggies, but

slowing down and walking normally would just admit that he knows how childish he's being.

He crashes to his bed a few seconds later, wiggling out of his jeans and letting them fall to the floor but keeping his socks on, and crawls underneath the covers, pulling them up to his chin. He turns around so he's got his back to the stairs, away from the light shining up past the railing. He still has to squeeze his eyes shut to be able to sleep, though.

—

It's not even that bad, is the thing.

Billy wakes up, and he doesn't think he feels worse than he did the day before. He doesn't feel better, either, but Billy's gone into school feeling worse than this before, so whatever.

He drags himself out of bed, and it isn't that bad, and he says good morning to the Chief on his way to the bathroom. His muscles feel weak, his abs too tight, and he stays underneath the warm spray of the shower for as long as possible, until he knows he has to get out because otherwise he'll be late to pick up Max.

Hop's left them food out on the kitchen counter, but Billy takes one lol at it and feels his throat start to draw in on itself and turns

around, walking straight out the door as Jane stares after him.

It's not that bad, Billy thinks, as he pulls up outside the new, smaller place Susan got for her and Max, his kind-of-still-almost sister waiting on the curb.

She climbs in, and immediately starts chattering on about this test she's got in school, and how stupid the boys were being during their last DnD campaign, and on and on.

Billy doesn't really mind it though, letting her voice distract him from the ache in his joints and the way it still feels like his head is one bad day away from a goddamn full blown migraine.

It's not even that bad. It's not even that bad, not until Billy's sitting in maths class and feeling his stomach muscles spasm, feeling cold sweat start to trickle down from the nape of his neck down his back.

Stomach acid burns its way up his throat, and Billy barely manages to swallow it back down, but he's certain he's going to throw up.

And he refuses to do so in class.

He sways a little when he pushes himself to standing, black spots dancing in and out of focus for a second, before he's stumbling to the front of the class.

His teacher looks up from the papers she's grading as he comes to lean against her desk, palms flat down to hold him up.

He has to swallow several times before daring to try speaking. "B-Bathroom. Bathroom pass."

She hands him one, frowning at his shaking arms. "Do you-?"

Billy's out the door before she has time to finish her question.

He stumbles along down the corridor, trying to keep the gags that want to surface down until he gets to a bathroom stall. The schools too bright, making his head ache, and Billy just wants to close his eyes.

He's not certain he's going to get to a bathroom on time. He's lightheaded, saliva filling his mouth and making it hard to swallow, hard to breathe, and Billy thinks that maybe, maybe if he... if he just sat down, for a second, just to catch his breath, just to take a couple seconds to breathe, then maybe-

The floor rushes up to meet him. He thinks he hears someone let out a shout, which is strange, because Billy thought he was alone. He barely manages to get his hands under himself before it goes dark.

When he blinks his eyes open, he's on his back, someone's hand lying flat on his forehead.

“Go get the nurse! He’s burning up, Nance,” a voice says, and Billy squeezes his eyes shut at the beat of shoes taking off running down the hall. “Hargrove? Hey, Billy, you with me, man?”

Slowly, Billy opens his eyes again. Jonathan Byers’ face flickers into focus above him.

“Byers?”

Jonathan’s still got his hand pressed against Billy’s head. It’s weird, but Billy doesn’t really mind it, because Jonathan’s hands are cool.

As is the floor, and Billy can’t help but shiver.

Jonathan’s frowning. “How you feeling? What’s wrong?”

“Was ‘bout to throw up,” Billy says, and finds that the nausea seems to have abated a little, from lying down. If anyone had to find him, Billy’s glad it’s Jonathan. He doesn’t seem to be the type going round spreading rumours and talking shit to embarrass Billy for the little tumble he took on his way to kiss the dirty school floor. Besides, Hop and his mum seem to have some strange middle aged romance going on.

Jonathan wrinkles his nose. “You gonna throw up over me?”

“Nah,” Billy breathes. “You’re not worth it.”

Jonathan snorts. “God, you’re an asshole.”

Billy grins, but a sudden sharp cramp in his stomach has him closing his eyes again and letting out a low groan from deep in his throat.

Billy doesn’t remember Wheeler was there, too, until she’s back, the school nurse in tow.

Thankfully she doesn’t stay for long, the nurse sending her along to Billy’s class to inform his teacher that he’s sick. Jonathan has to help him up to standing, which is fucking embarrassing, and it gets worse when he and the nurse take up positions on each side of him, helping him get to her office. But if he’s honest, Billy’s pretty sure he’d just plop back down if they let him go.

Jonathan leaves them then, once Billy’s settled on the exam bed, his legs swinging, scurrying off to find his girlfriend so they can get to class.

The nurse takes his temperature, tuts, and puts a blanket around his shoulders. Billy grips it and pulls it tighter around himself. She asks him if his head hurts, and Billy smirks, says, “Like a bitch,” and is relieved when she only rolls her eyes in response. He tells her his stomach hurts, that he’s nauseous, that he doesn’t have any appetite and hasn’t actually drunk anything since lunch yesterday. That makes her fill a plastic cup with water and press it into his hands.

“It’s probably the stomach flu,” she says. “It’s been going around. I’m going to ask Principal Jones to call you par-“ she stops herself, smiling gently. “Your guardian.”

She helps him out of the room, down into one of the plush armchairs outside, and closes the door while she goes to call Hopper.

Billy doesn’t really know what to expect. He chuckles to himself when he thinks that had this happened two months ago, Neil would have told them he could either get back to class or make his own way home. Susan might have picked him up. Maybe.

He’s not really expecting the nurse to go out and wait for the Chief, or for the Chief to get there in less than fifteen fucking minutes, but he does, rushing in and coming to a stop in front of Billy.

“Hi, Hop,” he says, not looking up, and only then realises how exhausted he feels. He has to take a second to collect himself, before pushing himself to standing. He sways, the blanket falling off, and Hop reaches out and takes a hold of his arm.

“I can walk,” Billy mutters.

“Last I heard, you collapsed when you tried that by yourself. Just humour me, kid.” It unnerves him, when Hop calls him that. Kid. Forms a little pit in Billy’s stomach and makes him feel out of sorts. Weird. Shaky. Rattled and weak. Like someone’s trying to unarm him.

But he's too tired to protest, so he lets Hopper keep his arm on his, lets him guide Billy to the cruiser and open the door for him.

Billy puts the seatbelt on while Hopper rounds the car, leaning his aching head back against the cool window and putting a hand at the side of his belly, trying to breathe and make it settle.

He hasn't actually thrown up yet. He isn't looking forward to when it eventually happens.

The nausea builds, Billy's body feeling rocked and thrown off its center from the movement of the car, and Billy has to swallow, tries to breathe through it, but it builds and builds and *builds* -

And then it crests, and Billy throws an arm out, hand landing on the door handle, the other one going to unfasten the seatbelt. "Stop," he forces out, and part of him isn't actually expecting Hop to stop.

But he does, the car jerking to a stop close to the drive up to the cabin, and Billy's falling out of his seat and to the ground, vomit immediately forcing its way up his throat and out.

It gushes out of him in painful heaves that make his stomach contract. The wind makes the leaves rustle, and chills Billy to the bone, leaving him shivering and trying to curl up to preserve heat.

He coughs up a couple mouthfuls more, the nausea not abating even as no more vomit comes out. Another sharp cramp in his stomach has

him gasping, trying to bend over.

And then the Chief's there, or perhaps he's been here for a while, but Billy first notices him when he reaches out and pushes Billy's sweaty curls out of his face.

"You think you're finished?"

"Don't know," Billy groans, trying to twist away, out of Hopper's hold. He's trying to hold him upright, but that hurts, and Billy just wants to curl up here on the side of the road and try to sleep, try to breathe in the crisp air and hope the nausea will lessen.

"We're almost home; if you're not going to throw up more, then let's get back in the car."

"No," he protests.

"Billy. You going to throw up right this second?"

He takes a second to think about it. It doesn't feel like there's anything else to throw up, but the nausea's still there, and Billy really doesn't want to move.

But it's cold out here.

“No,” he finally relents, no more than a whisper.

“Okay. I’m not letting you stay out here on the ground. Come on, I’ll help you up.”

He feels like a rag doll, all energy going to control the nausea, so he doesn’t say anything as Hop puts his hands at his armpits and lifts him up, pushing him back into the car and somehow managing to avoid the mess on the roadside.

Billy pulls his legs up, arms going around them, and leans his head forward, pressing his face down in between his knees and trying to breathe.

He looks up a little while later, only to realise the car’s come to a stop outside the cabin. A glance to his side and he sees Hopper’s no longer there.

There’s no good, logical explanation for the crushing feeling of abandonment Billy feels then, pressing down on his lungs and making his eyes sting. He doesn’t know what he’d expected. Why he’d thought that Hop would round the car and help him out, help him up the steps to the cabin. He’s seventeen years old, he should be able to get up the stairs by himself.

He fumbles to get the door open, and slowly, slowly, steps out, making sure both his feet are steady on the ground before he tries to walk. It’s slow going, but it thankfully isn’t far, and soon Billy’s stepping up to the front door and pushing it open.

Hopper's there. I'm the way. He jumps a little when Billy opens the door, stepping back and staring at him.

Billy's breathing hard, and everything *hurts*. It's like when he'd spent the whole day at the beach, swimming from morning until sundown, but worse. He wants Hop to move. He wants to get to his bed. He wants to sleep.

He wants to cry, and isn't that fucking embarrassing.

All energy sags out of him like a little wind-up toy as he starts to topple forward like a crumbling tower of bricks.

Hop steps closer, and Billy ends up leaning against him.

"Okay. Hey, kid? I'm going to help you up the stairs, okay?"

Billy hums.

Hopper changes positions so he's got his arm around Billy's waist, and together they start walking towards the stairs and up to the loft.

Hopper helps him to the bed, and Billy tries to not lean on him too much. He more or less falls down on the mattress, kicking his shoes off before lying down on his side, his back to Hop and the stairs. He's

got two pillows, and he reaches for one of them now, hugging it to his torso and curling up around it. Behind him, he hears Hop shake out his duvet, placing it over his shivering body. Billy closes his eyes and goes to sleep.

---

When he wakes up, he knows he's going to throw up.

And he knows he won't be able to get down in time to throw up in the toilet bowl.

Still, he tries to keep it down. He wonders if this is a test, if Hopper's trying to evaluate how strong Billy is, see if he can make his way to the bathroom without breaking his neck. He swallows, and swallows, and tries to breathe through the nausea, tries to focus on anything and everything else, at the wind or the rustling of leaves outside or the goddamn tears that prick at his eyes.

But there's not much he can do when shooting pain stabs through his stomach, immediately making him heave and forcing bile up.

His visions blurry, but he can smell it, disgustingly sour as it overwhelms his senses and only makes him more nauseous.

When it's over, Billy has to blink several times before his vision clears enough to see the mess on his duvet, and right around that second is when his hands start to shake, his breathes coming in soft gasps. A sob forces its way past his trembling lips, and hot tears start to make their way down his cheeks.

His dad's going to kill him.

He needs to clean it up before he finds out. That's all Billy can think about. He needs to clean up. He needs to clean up the fucking mess he's made or he's going to end up a fucking mess on the floor. Again.

He scrambles out of bed, immediately losing his footing and falling down to the floor be the side of it, pulling the duvet down with him. He tries to stand back up, but he can't, his legs feeling like cooked spaghetti.

He doesn't know how long he stays like that, just trying to regain enough strength to stand. Trying to calm the panic that makes his heart race. It's long enough for heavy steps to make their way up the stairs, coming closer to him.

They stop a little bit away, and Billy tries to compose himself, tries to prepare himself for the kick he's expecting will land against his aching middle any second now.

Still, he can't help but flinch when his dad steps closer. Billy's hands twist in the duvet, knuckles whitening. He tries to curl up into a little ball, tries to make himself as small a target as possible.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry, I’m going to clean it up, I’m sorry,” he says, voice pitifully small. “It won’t happen again, I didn’t mean to... I’m sorry, I’m sorry sir...”

But it doesn’t help, of course it doesn’t, Billy’s excuses have never helped him no matter how sincere they’ve been. His dad starts walking up to him again, and Billy hates the whimper that escapes him.

But then his dad lowers himself to the floor beside him, and no, that’s... that’s wrong, Neil wouldn’t-

“Billy?” a voice that isn’t his dad’s says.

“Hey, kid, can you look at me? Please?”

He tries to place it, tries to figure out why the sound of the man sends both signals of caution and uncertain and safe throw his brain, and all the while the voice doesn’t let up, just keeps speaking to him in that rough gentle way.

He turns to look up at him, and finally figures out where he is. Neil’s in jail. The man in front of him made sure of it.

“Hey,” Hopper breathes. “Good, kid. Good. It’s Jim. Jim Hopper. Hop.”

Billy looks at him, thinks he should probably say something, make some move to show he understands, because Hopper looks *worried*, but then there's a sharp flash of pain that makes him bend over, arms reaching for his belly as he keens.

And Hop's there, and Billy's pretty certain that Hop means safety, so when he's pulled back against his chest he doesn't try to twist away, just rests his pounding head against him and tries to not sob loud enough for Jane to hear. He's cold, and Hop's stroking his hair, and everything hurts.

He says as much, and feels Hop hold him a little tighter.

"Stomach cramps?" he asks.

Billy nods. He regrets speaking. The nausea's coming back.

"I got you something that might help against that. But first, we really ought to get you into some more comfortable clothes. I'm going to help you up, okay?"

Billy nods again, and Hop keeps his arms around him as he pushes them both up to standing. He helps Billy to the chair by his desk, and leaves him there while he goes to get him new clothes.

"Lower drawer on the left," Billy mutters, because he may be nauseous but he's got a few magazines stuffed in another drawer that he'd rather Hop didn't find now. Or ever.

Hop finds a pair of pyjama pants, ones that Susan got him for Christmas a year ago and that he only started wearing after they moved to Hawkins. A band shirt that's been washed so many times the logo's almost faded away comes next, and while Billy changes, Hop strips his bed and takes it all with him downstairs.

It feels like Billy blinks, closes his eyes for a second, and when they open next Hop's back, helping him over to his made bed.

"Don't fall asleep yet," he tells him as Billy goes to lie down. "I'll be back in a minute."

He leaves him again, and Billy curls up on his side, hugging himself and hoping the pressure will make his stomach stop hurting.

He's almost asleep when he's rudely shaken awake. He whimpers and tries to shrug the hand on his shoulder off, but then he hears Hop's voice. Sounding somehow both exasperated and amused.

"Hey, Billy. What did I say? No sleeping yet."

Billy turns to look at him, his stomach protesting the movement, and blinks a couple times to get the sleep out of his eyes.

"Here," Jim says, handing him a thermometer. "I'm going to get you a bucket in case you need to throw up again."

Hopper disappears again, presumably to get said bucket, and Billy doesn't really bother looking at the result on the thermometer. He just holds it out for Hop to take when he gets back.

Based on his expression when he takes it, though, Billy figures it must be pretty bad. Which makes sense, because he feels like utter *horseshit*.

“Shit, kid. Okay, come on, you gotta drink something.” Hop sits down on the edge of the bed, putting one arm underneath Billy's shoulders and helping him up so he's leaning against him. He hands him a can. Billy doesn't bother looking at the logo, he just takes it and starts to drink. “Here. Joyce said these help.”

His hand shakes so hard Billy has to grip the can right to not have it fall down onto the new sheets Hopper's got him. No matter how nice he might seem, even he would have to be annoyed by that.

He's ready to fall asleep when he hands the can back to Hop, who puts it on a tray Billy's only now realising rests on his nightstand.

His hair is smoothed down, and Hop moves him so he can lie back down. But then he's also pulling the covers back, and Billy's cold, goddamnit, but Hop only does it so he can place something warm on Billy's stomach, above the shirt. It's so surprising it makes him flinch, sucking in a sharp breath.

“Does it help?” Hop asks, frowning.

There's a pleasant heat slowly spreading out over his belly, relaxing the muscles there. "Maybe," Billy groans out, turning to look at Hop and whispering a soft "Thank you."

Hop pats his arm as he stands up. He actually tucks Billy in, as though he's a little kid, but it's nice and keeps the heat underneath the covers so Billy doesn't say anything.

"No problem, kid. I'll be downstairs. Shout if you need me. Or..." he bends down, picking up one of Billy's dirty socks. "Throw this one over the railing and I'll hopefully see it," he says, placing it down on the edge of the tray he'd brought.

Billy laughs a little, closing his eyes and hearing Hop walk back down the stairs. He turns his head to the side and surrenders back to sleep.

—

He's shaken awake again.

"Hey," Hop says. "I made dinner."

Billy *really* doesn't feel like eating anything. Billy *really* doesn't feel

like throwing up again.

He lets his displeasure be known by groaning and turning his back on Hopper, finding his legs tangled in the duvet and cold air on his bare arms making him shiver.

“No, hey-“ Hop says, stopping him with a hand on his arm and turning him back to face him. “I need to get some medicine in you, but I’m not letting you have it on an empty stomach. Just some rice, okay? And a banana.”

Billy sighs, and hates how reasonable all that sounds. He just wants to sleep. Had he been at home, the most medicine Billy would have gotten would have been sneakily handed to him by Susan or would have been something he’d have to get for himself, going out to rummage through the medicine cabinet while everyone else was asleep.

Hopper turns around and goes back downstairs, and while he’s gone, Billy pushes himself up to sitting, leaning back against the headboard with his pillow between it and his back. He hates how much his arms shake from just trying to hold his own weight up.

When Hop gets back, he’s got a bowl filled with rice, a small piece of chicken to the side. It’s handed to him, along with a fork and knife, and Billy sees him put another sports drink and banana on his nightstand.

He doesn’t think he’ll be able to eat it all.

As though he can read his mind, Hop says, “You don’t have to finish everything. I’ll be back in half an hour? Just try to eat as much as you can, alright?”

Billy nods, most of his focus on the food and how he’s somehow both slightly hungry while also fighting the rolling of his stomach.

Absentmindedly, he notices Hopper leave. He takes a cautious bite, just a little rice. When nothing horrible happens, no sudden bout of nausea, he takes another. Slowly, he eats most of the rice, and a few bites of chicken. To make Hop happy - and isn’t that a strange wish to have - Billy reaches for the banana, glad to find it’s not that big, and eats it. He leaves the peel in the bowl, and puts it all away on the nightstand.

He lies back down, curling up on his side and facing the stairs. Hop comes back a while later, glancing over to see how much he’s eaten. He smiles a little when he sees it, and Billy tries to ignore the warm feeling that spreads through him at that.

“How you feeling?” Hop asks, turning to look at him.

“Cold. Head hurts,” Billy says, closing his eyes.

“Okay, well. Sit back up for me, will you. I’ve got water and pills.”

“Never thought a cop would be offering me drugs.”

“Shut up, kid. It’s supposed to make you feel better.”

“Yeah it is.”

He hears Hop choke on a laugh, and can’t help but grin a little at that. “You’re a little shit, you know that?”

“It’s not the worst I’ve been called,” Billy says, opening his eyes and pushing himself up to sitting. Hop’s smile disappears, and Billy regrets saying anything. He really needs to learn when to shut up. His mouth’s gotten him into at least as much trouble as his fists.

“I’m sorry, Billy.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Billy says, trying to get back to break the sudden gloom. “Hand me my drugs, Chief.”

A small smile pulls at Hop’s lips, and he hands Billy a glass of water first, then the medicine. Billy swallows the pills in one big gulp.

He takes the glass back and Billy lies back down, pulling the covers up to his chin and closing his eyes.

“Goodnight, Billy.”

“Night, Hop.”

---

When Billy wakes up, it feels like he’s being split in two. He tries to curl up around his middle, hoping that will ease the cramping there, but it doesn’t help, it just makes him nauseous. Which, combined with everything else, makes him start to sob.

Distantly, he thinks he hears someone speak. The bed dips as though someone’s sitting down and next Billy feels hands on him. He’s going to throw up. *Fuck*, he doesn’t want to.

There’s a blurry shape next to him but Billy ignores it in favour of throwing himself towards the edge of the bed, reaching for the bucket he thinks is there.

The shape doesn’t like that. Hands reach for him and pull him back up, leaning him back against something soft and solid and breathing, and Billy tries to push them away. He tries to voice his protest but all that comes out is a whimper. He’s too afraid to open his mouth, too afraid it’ll make him retch.

The cool plastic of the bucket lands against his chest, and it's just in time.

The nausea surges, vomit forcing itself up his throat and pooling in his mouth, instinct making him part his lips to let it out, even though he knows it's going to hurt like hell.

And it does. It hurts like Billy imagines it would feel if Neil was socking him while he's hung over.

But Neil's not here. The thought hits him like a fright train when he feels the person behind him pull his hair back, away from the vomit his still coughing up.

"You're okay. You're okay, kid, you're okay."

Hopper.

"Hurts," Billy says, spitting one last time. He wishes it would stop. Wishes he could stop crying. Wishes this wasn't happening. "Hurts so bad."

"Okay," Hop says, and there's a note of something in his voice but Billy's too tired to try to figure out what it is. "Okay. What hurts? Stomach?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I mean- *Everything* hurts, but *shit*, shit, *ow...*" A cramp

hits him just as he's answering, and he tries to bend down towards it but the bucket's still in his lap and all that does is make him breathe in a lungful of the acrid smell.

"Okay, Billy? Did the heating pad help?"

"I-I guess..."

"Right. Okay," Hop says, and the bucket's moved away from him. He moves away from behind Billy, lowering him back down. He turns on his side and curls back up, squeezing his eyes shut and just trying to breathe through the pain.

He's not certain when he falls asleep.

—

Billy wakes slowly.

Slowly, his eyes open. Slowly, he becomes aware of how everything aches, how he feels both uncomfortably hot and incredibly cold, how the skin underneath his eyes feels puffy and sticky. How he really, *really* needs to piss.

He pushes himself up, and drags his aching body towards the end of the bed, where he swings his legs over to let his feet land on the floor. He has to take a couple seconds to stay like that, just to prepare himself to stand without falling to the floor.

“Hey. Hey, where do you think you’re going?”

Billy jumps so hard he thinks he’s about to crash down anyway. Hopper’s still here, apparently.

“Bathroom?” Billy says, and hates how unsure he sounds about it. He is going to the bathroom, no matter what Hop says. He’s half expecting him to tell him to piss in the same bucket he threw up in, like something from the previous century.

But all Hop says is “Okay,” and, “Come on then.” Billy looks up to see him stand up from Billy’s desk chair, which he must’ve moved closer to his bed while Billy slept, and go up to him. He puts an arm around Billy’s waist, and Billy’s too surprised to say anything when Hop helps him up to standing and keeps his arm there. It’s good he does it though, because Billy’s legs immediately go out from underneath him. “One step at a time,” Hop says.

Together, they make their way down the stairs to the bathroom, but Hop stops him with a hand on his arm when Billy tries to step away to enter.

“Don’t lock the door,” Hop says, letting go off him.

Billy rolls his eyes. And regrets it when the world does a little spin. "Pervert," he mutters quietly, a joke but not one he wants Hop to hear. He doesn't know how he'd react to it.

"Hey. If I hear a thud, I don't want to have to break down the door."

Billy smiles to himself as he closes the door behind himself, hoping Hopper didn't catch it.

All of his energy is zapped by the time he's leaving his position leaning against the sink after washing his hands, and stumbling towards the door. Hop's there to catch him when he gets out, though, and Billy lets him take some of his weight as they make their way up.

He more or less falls back into bed, curling up on his side underneath the covers. The thermometer from yesterday appears by his face, and Billy lets out a groan. He just wants to sleep.

But Hop isn't likely to leave it, so Billy decides to indulge him and takes it. Hop seems satisfied with that course of action, and leaves him to go back downstairs.

Billy chances a glance at the thermometer when it's finished taking his temperature. 103. That's... not particularly good. Not particularly shocking, either. He feels like shit. He leaves the thermometer on the mattress next to his head and pulls the covers tighter.

When Hop gets back and takes the thermometer, Billy avoids his

gaze.

“Shit, kid. No wonder you feel like shit.”

Billy breathes out a laugh. *Yeah, Chief, agreed.*

“Okay, this is going to feel a little cold...” Hop says, the mattress dipping as he sits down. He smooths Billy’s hair nice, which is really nice, but then he puts something cold on his forehead which is decidedly less nice.

He flinches and reaches up to remove it, but Hop catches his wrist and pulls it back down.

“C-Cold-“ Billy stutters, his teeth shattering as his shivers increase.

“I know. But we’ve gotta cool you down. It’s this or I’m dragging you back down to the bathroom and stuffing you into the shower, clothes and all.”

Billy clenches his jaw and tries to stop his trembling.

“Right,” Hop says and stands up. “I’m going to go get you some medicine, don’t move.”

“Where would I even go?” Billy asks aloud while Hop makes his way down the stairs again.

Hop’s back in under two minutes.

“Here, kid,” he says, helping Billy up to sitting and holding out two little pills and a glass of water. Billy’s hand shakes so hard Hop keeps his hand on it while Billy drinks, and it would make him feel embarrassed if it wasn’t for the fact that he’s somewhat more afraid of getting cold water spilled all over his lap. It’s enough that Hopper puts that wet towel back on his forehead when he lies down again, making him whimper.

Billy closes his eyes and tries to sleep, and by the time he’s minutes away from falling back asleep he feels Hop wet the towel again. He sighs at the feeling of it back on his forehead, and burrows deeper into his blankets.

—

Billy’s not really sure where he is when he wakes up. All he knows is that he’s cold, and his stomach *hurts*.

He’s leaning back against something, something that moves and puts something else in front of him when the nausea crests and makes him gag.

Nothing comes up. No matter how nauseous he feels and how much it feels like there's a fist behind his bellybutton, clenching and twisting his insides in a death grip. Nothing but spit and tears and whimpers and fucking whines come out.

The thing he was meant to throw up in disappears, and tries to follow along, tries to reach for it and bring it back. But it's moved away past his line of sight, and next he hears someone hushing him like you might a baby. A big hand lands on his cheeks, pulling his head down to rest against that warm, solid thing.

He tries to push back, but he's too weak and tired, so instead he chances a glance up and sees the face of a man. With wrinkled eyebrows. Concerned. He's got a moustache, and it takes Billy a couple seconds to reassure himself it isn't Neil.

*You can trust this man*, his subconscious tells him.

He exhales shakily, and before he knows it, he's sobbing. There's a tight, burning feeling in his stomach, and he tries to use his hands to hold himself together.

A cold compress is pressed against his forehead, and fingers with blunt nails start combing through his hair. It startles him before it makes him relax and lean back.

"You're okay," the safe man whispers. "Hey. Hey, kid. You're safe. You're safe here."

Billy sobs louder at that. He's never been safe.

The towel's removed, then placed back against his forehead. It ends up falling over his eyes, and Billy didn't even know his fucking eyelids were hurting until he feels the ache leg go when the cold presses against them.

"Shh, shh, hey. I've got you, kid. I've got you."

He succumbs back to sleep. The hand doesn't leave his hair.

—

Billy's just woken up, and Hop's trying to force water on him. Billy's throat is parched, but he kind of likes it that way, if only because it means he's less likely to throw up again. Every time he does, it leaves him feeling shaky and weaker than before, stomach muscles tender and aching.

He shakes his head again.

"If you don't drink, you're going to end up dehydrated. And then I'll take you to the hospital."

“Hurts,” Billy whispers, and Hop looks so fucking sad when he gazes at him.

“I know. But you’re sweating out everything I’ve managed to get you to drink. And you need liquids, Billy. You’re going to dry out. Like a raisin.”

Billy wrinkles his nose at that. He’s not a fucking raisin. He hates raisins.

He sighs and gives a small nod, and doesn’t protest when Hop helps him up and hands him a glass of water. It’s cold and soothing and Billy braces himself for the nausea, but it doesn’t come. Instead, he feels a sharp stab of pain in his stomach and closes his eyes as he lies down. He keeps his hands on it, trying to figure out how to lie to avoid more cramps.

They spend a while like that, in silence, before Hop says, “You want a book or something?”

“I just want to sleep,” Billy whispers with a groan. At least when he’s sleeping, he doesn’t have to feel anything.

“Would it... would it maybe help distract you if I read something? Out loud?” Hop asks, and the offer is so unexpected it leaves Billy blindsided for a minute or so.

Eventually, when he decides that he didn't actually imagine what Hopper just said, he says, "Third book on the fourth pile away from the window."

It's his mum's old copy of *The Hobbit*. She used to read it to him when he was a kid, and it was one of the few things she left him when she went away.

On his way back to his seat in Billy's desk chair, Hop stops to wet the towel and put it back in Billy's forehead. He closes his eyes when he does, and lets Hopper's voice transport him to Middle Earth.

—

When Billy wakes up, the sun is shining in through his window and lighting the floor up into gold.

He feels better. Not good, definitely not great, but better. He's covered in sweat though, as though he's just finished a basketball game, and he smells.

Slowly, he sits up and swings his legs over the bed. Takes a second to breathe, before he stands up. When he doesn't immediately fall back down, Billy chances a step forward. Then another one, and another, and eventually he's at his wardrobe. He gets out a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt, a clean pair of socks, grabbing his towel from where it's

thrown over the side of his desk and walks over to the stairs.

He keeps the railing in a death grip as he makes his way downstairs.

It's not until he's at the foot of the stairs that he recognises he can hear Hop moving around in the kitchen, and when he looks up, Hopper's already staring at him with raised eyebrows. Where do you think you're going, kid? Billy sees his eyes shift to the towel.

"I won't lock the door," he says, voice so painfully weak he's not certain Hop even heard him.

But Hop nods, and Billy closes the door behind himself without locking it. His clothes stick to him, and he sits down on the closed toilet seat while he slips them off, before gingerly stepping into the shower.

He's still sick, but showering and feeling clean does wonders to make him feel better. Even if he shivers as soon as he turns off the water and meets the change in temperature of the air outside. He changes into clean clothes and dries his hair of as much as possible, leaving his curls damp but not dripping when he steps out.

Hop motions towards the couch, explaining, "I opened the window upstairs. Stay down here for a bit; you need to eat something."

When Billy sits down, Hop comes up from behind him and covers his shoulders with a blanket. He disappears for a second only to come

back and hand him a sports drink before returning to the kitchen.

Billy stays where he is, taking a sip of the drink. He puts it down on the coffee table and keeps his hands in his lap, fingers twisting around each other. He's not certain how he's supposed to be acting now.

"Here," Hop says, and Billy looks up to see him holding out a plate with two pieces of buttered toast. Billy takes it and brings one up to nibble on as Hopper sits down beside him. He grabs the remote and motions at the TV with it, turning to look at Billy. "You want to watch something?"

Billy shrugs. "Sure."

Hop nods, turning it on and zapping until they land on some rerun of some show Billy knows Max likes to watch.

They sit in silence for a while, Billy eating his toasts and trying to figure out how long he's supposed to stay here before he can venture back up to the sanctuary of his room. He wonders if Hopper finds the silence as awkward as Billy does.

"Listen," Hop eventually says, sounding unsure and nervous. "We need to... We should talk. I'm not good at... this. Talking, but--"

"Then don't," Billy says, keeping his head down and eyes averted. He doesn't want to hear Hop reprimand him for how childish he's been

acting all of yesterday. For how he made Hop leave work to come and pick him up. "You don't have to say anything. I get it."

"Oh," Hop breathes, and Billy feels him relax back against the cushions. He sounds relieved. "Alright."

"Yeah."

But then, less than five minutes later, Hop's straightening back up and turning down the volume of the TV. A pity. Billy was just about to get into it. "Alright, no. No. We need to talk. *I* need to talk, and I need you to listen."

Billy doesn't like where this is going. It's instinct more than anything else at this point for his body to tense, for him to swallow and force his breathing to stay normal. He spares a second to wonder where the hell Jane is. If she's listening in from her room, ready to radio Max and tell her everything.

Hop breathes in deep before speaking, and Billy knows that means he's about to hear a speech. "I feel like this conversation has been long overdue. You moved in... weeks ago. And I'm afraid I haven't been clear enough on what it means, staying here with us. This is... This is supposed to be your home now, okay? And I know you're not used to this, and it's going to take you time, but... If you're hungry, you can help yourself to whatever in the kitchen. If you can't finish something, put it in the fridge for later. You don't have to stay up on the loft from the moment you get home. If you go to a party, and you get drunk, because you're a teenager and you're going to, then I'd rather you called me to come pick you up than for you to crash into a tree. And I need you to know that if you ever feel sick, you can just tell me and I'll call you in. You don't have to try to power through."

*What? What the fuck? What the actual fuck is any of that supposed to mean?!*

“I get that you’re not about to start seeing me as your dad, now, but you kind of are my kid. And that means that I care about you. And I’m going to ground you if you do something stupid, I’ll put you on babysitting duty instead of letting you go out to party, but I won’t ever hurt you. Okay? Never. And I won’t let anyone else do so, either. No one’s going to get to put their hands on you, alright?”

“What if I put mine on them first?” Billy challenges. He’s not expecting what Hopper answers with.

“Then I’ll listen to your reason for doing it, and then I might take your car away and have you deal with being dropped of and picked up by your foster dad, the Chief of Police, for a week or so.”

Billy burrows deeper into his blanket at that, pulling his legs up onto the couch.

“But this all also means that I want to know what goes on with you, alright? With your life. I want to know if you’re struggling in some class, or if you’re proud of an assignment you’ve done. If something fun happened at school. How basketball practice is going. All of that. You’re not a ghost, Billy. You survived your dad. I want you to live now.”

*‘You’re not a ghost.’ You’re not a ghost. You’re not a ghost. You’re alive.*

*Jesus fucking Christ, Billy, you're still alive.*

Billy has to swallow down a sob. He doesn't move, neither does Hop, but then Billy takes one of those ugly pillows Hop keeps on the couch and, feeling brave, puts it down on Hop's thigh. He lies down, head resting on the pillow.

"I'm tired," he whispers. "Can you put the TV back on?"

Hop takes the remote and turns the volume back up. His hand lands on Billy's shoulder, and he starts rubbing his arm over the blanket.

"I've got a game in two weeks," Billy decides to try. "If you want to go."

He hears the smile in Hop's voice without having to look up. "Yeah, kid. I want to go."

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

I hope you guys liked it!

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### **Author's Note:**

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